

# Study Material

## Semester-VI

**Alice Walker – *The Color Purple***

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### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

Learning Objectives

Introduction

Alice Walker- Her Oeuvre

Womanism

The Text

Major Themes

Exercise

Summing Up

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### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES:**

The students would learn about-

- African American literature and Alice Walker's contribution to it.
  - Feminism- three waves of feminism and Alice Walker's concept of womanism and its distinction from mainstream feminism.
  - African American cultural identity, marginalisation and exclusion in American society and culture.
  - Alice Walker's internal critique of patriarchal violence within African American society and African American woman's journey towards liberation.
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## Introduction

Alice Walker is the first African American woman to receive the prestigious Pulitzer Award for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982). Novelist, essayist, short story writer and poet, Alice Walker was a social activist- first associated with the Civil Rights Movement and later publishing the feminist *Ms Magazine*.

*The Color Purple* is a product of Walker's experiences of growing up as a Black woman in the American South. The novel is an incisive critique of the inherent and structural racism in American society- more particularly in the American South – while at the same time highly critical of the internal hierarchies and gender violence within the African American society.

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## Alice Walker (1944- )

As already said Alice Walker is a renowned African American writer. Her creative energy was channelized through many directions. She was

- Novelist, short story-writer, essayist, poet and social activist.
- In 1982 she became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Color Purple*.
- She was born in Eatonton, Georgia in a rural farming town. Her father was a farmer and her mother was a maid. She had the first hand experience of issues of racial violence in American South and gender inequality within her community. Her activism can be summarised in the following way—
- She was involved in the Civil Rights Movement- met Martin Luther King Jr. as a student at **Spelman College**. She took part in 1963 March on Washington and later volunteered to register black voters in Georgia and Mississippi- *Meridian* is a novel about activist workers in the South, during the Civil Rights Movement-
- She supported the Palestinians in the Israel-Palestine Conflict.
- She supported Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange
- As the editor of *Ms Magazine*, a liberal feminist magazine she wrote against gender inequalities in society.

*Meridian* (1976), set against the background of the Civil Rights Movement, is the story about Meridian Hill & Truman. Meridian gets involved with Civil Right Movement in the 1960s and 70s when it turned violent opposing the non-violent. It offers a critique that the revolution never addressed the women's sufferings but rather continued with destructive and often chauvinistic values. In the story Meridian becomes pregnant and

is forced to abort. But Truman later is found having a relationship with a white woman. It is a womanist text celebrating the power and strong character of Meridian.

#### **Other Novels:**

- The Temple of My Familiar
  - Possessing the Secret of Joy- Tashi, a minor character in *The Color Purple* is the lead character here. She is from Olinka, Walker's fictional African nation where female genital mutilation is practiced on young girls. Tashi, torn between two cultures decides to do it and descends to madness. Walker criticises the negative aspects of tradition- Torture **is not culture**.
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**Womanism:** *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose* (1982) Alice Walker coined the term womanism. As different from mainstream Western feminism, Womanism talks about the intersection of race and gender. There is a focus on community as opposed to white feminism's focus on domestic life and domestic confinement. Black women worked in factories from much earlier times. But their lower wage and lack of representation is not addressed by white feminism. **White feminism did not question white supremacy.** The feminist movement can be divided into three waves-

First wave feminism / suffrage movement/ liberal feminism focused on the demand for rights- political (right to vote) and property rights. But it did not include the black women.

Second wave included them but from gender perspective- race not included. Woman is thought of as a universal category. It was marked by colour blindness.

Third wave feminism focussed on intersectionality- race, caste, class etc were taken into consideration along with gender. This led to womanism and other versions of feminism.

Womanism celebrates female bonding as liberating and empowering- something that is found in *The Color Purple*. Women's role as care giver and stabiliser of family during slavery and women's role during civil rights movement as leaders and organisers should be recognised. In the recent Black Lives Matter movement there is a focus on community and women played important roles. Womanism celebrates woman's power and potentialities, woman's culture, creativity and female bonding. *The Color Purple* is a brilliant example of a womanist text.

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**Celie**, a young girl who lives with her abusive father, her sick **mother**, and her younger sister **Nettie**, begins writing letters to **God**. In her first letters, she details how her father has been sexually abusing her. Celie becomes pregnant twice, and each time her father gives away the children.

A man named Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ begins courting Nettie. Celie encourages Nettie's marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ because Celie fears her father (**Pa**) will soon turn his sexual attentions toward Nettie. But Pa does not permit Nettie to marry Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, instead insisting that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ marry Celie, since she is older and a hard-worker. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ believes Celie to be ugly, but eventually is convinced to marry her, because he has several children by his previous wife (who was murdered), and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ needs someone to take care of them.

Celie marries Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and moves in with him. Nettie later escapes Pa and lives with Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ for a brief period. But Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ still has designs on Nettie, and Nettie flees to town, staying with the Reverend **Samuel** and his wife **Corrine**, whom Celie once met, briefly. By coincidence, Samuel and Corrine have adopted **Olivia** and **Adam**, Celie's two children. Celie believed she recognized Olivia, when she saw her with Corrine in a shop. Nettie promises Celie she will write to her from her new home, but these letters never arrive.

Celie takes care of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s children, whom she considers "rotten" save for **Harpo**, the oldest, who marries a strong, hard-working woman named **Sofia**. Harpo becomes upset that he cannot get Sofia to obey him; both Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie (at first) recommend that Harpo beat Sofia. But when Celie sees how Harpo's attempts at beating have hurt both Harpo and Sofia, Celie apologizes to Sofia, and the two become friends.

**Shug Avery**, a lover from Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s past, comes to town, sick, and stays with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. They strike up their affair once more, with Celie's knowledge. Celie has been fixated on Shug since seeing a picture of her, on a playbill, when Celie was a girl. Celie and Shug become friends and confidantes, and, later, lovers. Shug begins to sing at a bar Harpo has built behind his shack, after Sofia leaves him (she is tired of being beaten and ordered around by Harpo). Celie tells Shug about her father's sexual abuse, and about Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s beatings. Shug promises to protect Celie.

Shug and Celie discover that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has been hiding, for years, the letters Nettie has been sending to Celie. Celie reads the letters and discovers that Nettie, upon moving in with Samuel and Corrine, and their two children Olivia and Adam, began studying to be a missionary in Africa. Nettie then traveled with the family to Harlem, in New York City, on to England, and to various cities in Africa, observing the culture and traditions of the people there, before settling in a village of the Olinka people. Nettie works for Samuel and Corrine, aids in the education of Olivia and Adam, and comes to know a girl named **Tashi**, whose

mother, **Catherine**, does not approve of Tashi being educated in the Western manner. Celie begins writing letters to Nettie rather than to God.

Corrine, it is revealed, believes that Samuel has had an affair with Nettie back in Georgia, and that Adam and Olivia are actually Nettie's children. This is why, Corrine thinks, Olivia and Adam so resemble Nettie. Nettie swears to Corrine that the two children are her sister Celie's, and Samuel corroborates her story, adding that Celie and Nettie's "Pa" is really their stepfather, and that their biological father was lynched, after his dry-goods store became too successful in the eyes of his white neighbors in Georgia.

Back in Georgia, Celie, spurred on by Shug, confronts Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ for withholding Nettie's letters for so many years. Celie, Shug, Shug's husband **Grady** (whom she has married in the interim), and **Squeak**, Harpo's second wife, move to Memphis, where Shug continues her singing career (Shug already has a house there). Celie begins making pants, a business she will continue for the remainder of the novel, and Squeak and Grady fall in love and move away. Sofia, who was arrested years back for attacking the mayor and his wife after they acted disrespectfully to her, has been serving as the mayor's family maid for twelve years. She is finally released to Celie's home toward the end of the novel. Her children, raised by Harpo and Squeak, no longer recognize her.

Meanwhile, the Olinka village is destroyed by British rubber companies, who plow over the Olinkas crops and hunting land, and charge the Olinka rent and a water tax. Dispirited by their inability to save the village, Samuel, Nettie, and the children return to England after Corrine dies of illness.

In England, Samuel and Nettie realize that they are in love, and marry; they tell Olivia and Adam that their biological mother is Celie, and vow to reunite the families in Georgia. After one last trip to Africa, in which Tashi and Adam are married, Tashi, Adam, Olivia, Nettie, and Samuel arrive at Celie's house in Georgia—the house she inherited from her biological father after her stepfather's death—and find Celie's family in good order. Shug, who had run away for a time with a young man name Germaine for a last fling, has come back to live with Celie and be reconciled with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_; Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ himself has found religion and apologized to Celie for mistreating her (he has even carved Celie a **purple** frog, as a form of apology) and Squeak, Sofia, Harpo, and the remainder of the family realize that, although a great deal has happened over the past thirty years, they, as a family, feel younger and more energetic than ever before.

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## Major Themes of the Novel

### God & Spirituality

*The Color Purple* is known for its alternative conception of religion and spirituality. The first words written by **Celie**, the novel's protagonist, are "Dear **God**," and the novel ends with a letter, the salutation of which reads, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This encapsulates *The Color Purple's* relationship to religion and spirituality: a transition from a belief in a single God, an old white man in a long beard, to a God that exists all around, and is a part of human happiness. Celie begins writing letters to God in order to survive her father's sexual abuse; she later comes to view God as an outgrowth of nature's beauty, after **Shug** convinces her that God is more than what white people say, and what church teachings confirm.

Although Shug is not typically religious, she believes strongly that God wants people to be happy, and that God, too, wants to be loved, just as people do. **Nettie** serves as a missionary to the Olinka people, intending to spread Christianity, but realizes, like her sister, that God is more pervasive, more bound up in nature than some Christian teaching suggests. Even Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ comes to realize that he behaved evilly as a young man, and his growing belief in the "wonder" of God's creation makes him a better person, and a friend to Celie. Nettie's return to Celie, at the novel's end, confirms that the beauty of family togetherness is one manifestation of God's power on earth.

### Race and Racism

The novel takes place in two distinct settings—rural Georgia and a remote African village—both suffused with problems of race and racism. **Celie** believes herself to be ugly in part because of her very dark skin. **Sofia**, after fighting back against the genteel racism of the **mayor** and his **wife**, ends up serving as maid to that family, and as surrogate mother to **Eleanor**, who does not initially recognize the sacrifices Sofia has been forced to make. In general, very few career paths are open to the African Americans in the novel: for the men, farming is the main occupation, although **Harpo** manages to open a bar. For women, it

seems only possible to serve as a mother, or to perform for a living, to sing as **Squeak** and **Shug Avery** do.

In Africa, the situation **Nettie**, **Samuel**, **Corrine**, **Adam**, **Tashi**, and **Olivia** experience is not that much different. Nettie recalls that the ancestors of the Olinka, with whom she lives, sold her ancestors into slavery in America. The Olinka view African Americans with indifference. Meanwhile the English rubber workers, who build roads through the village and displace the Olinka from their ancient land, have very little concern for that people's history in Africa. The British feel that, because they are developing the land, they "own" it, and the African people who have lived there for centuries are merely "backward" natives. It is only at the very end of the novel, after Samuel, Nettie, and their family have returned from Africa, to Celie's home in Georgia, that Celie and Nettie's entire family is able to come together and dine—a small gift, and something that would be considered completely normal for the white families of that time period, whose lives had not been ripped apart by the legacy of slavery and poverty.

### **Patriarchy and Gender Justice**

The novel is also an extended meditation on the nature of men, women, and their expected gender roles. In the beginning, **Celie** is expected to serve her abusive father, and, later, her husband Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and **Nettie**, not wanting to do either, runs away. But Nettie sacrifices the job generally reserved for women—motherhood—in order to educate herself and work for **Samuel** and **Corrine** during their missionary labors in Africa. Celie, meanwhile, has two children, whom Nettie then raises in Africa, coincidentally—Celie only leaves behind the drudgery of housework when **Shug** comes to live with her and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and begins to teach Celie about her body and about other ways of living, outside the control of men. Celie and **Squeak**, **Harpo's** second wife, end up living with Shug in Memphis, and Celie is able to start her pants-making company.

The men in the novel, however, experience a different trajectory. It is expected that black men of this time, especially in the South, work in the fields, and that women obey them absolutely. But after Shug and then Celie leave him behind, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ realizes just how

much he took for granted and how much he, and his son Harpo, have relied on the work of women throughout their lives. Similarly, in Africa, Nettie manages both to achieve the gender role initially expected of her (by marrying the widower Samuel), and keeps working and forging her own path in life, eventually spending over twenty years as a missionary in Africa.

The end of the novel, then, celebrates both the continuity of family, populated both by strong female characters and repentant male ones, and the fact that "families," and the roles within them, are fluid, often overlapping, and part of a long arc toward equality and greater understanding, even if that arc is often dotted with tragedy, abuse, and neglect.

### **Violence and Suffering**

Violence and suffering in *The Color Purple* are typically depicted as part of a greater cycle of tragedy taking place both on the family level and on a broader social scale. **Celie** is raped by her stepfather and beaten for many years by her husband, only to have **Shug Avery** intervene on her behalf. **Sofia** is nearly beaten to death by white police officers after pushing a white family; she nearly dies in prison. **Nettie** is almost raped by her stepfather and by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and must run away in order to protect herself. **Harpo** tries, unsuccessfully, to beat and control Sofia, his first wife, and he beats **Squeak** until she leaves him for **Grady** (though Squeak returns to Celie's home at the end of the novel). These cycles of violence are repeated across the South: Celie's biological father and uncles were lynched by whites jealous of their business success, and there is always the threat that, if black people agitate too much for their rights, they will be struck down by the white people who control the local and state government.

In Africa, too, this violence occurs within the local culture and in the relation between whites and blacks. Men in the Olinka village have absolute control over their wives, and a scarring ritual takes place for all women going through permanently, leaving their faces permanently marked. The white British rubber dealers who take over the Olinka land end up killing a great many in the village, without concern for the humanity or customs of the Olinka, who have lived there for many years. But despite all this violence and suffering,



there is a core of hope in the novel: the hope that Celie and Nettie might be reunited. It is this hope that, eventually, stops the cycle of violence, at least within Celie's family, and enables the reunion of many of the family members in Georgia at the novel's end.

### Self- Discovery

The novel is, ultimately, a journey of self-discovery for **Celie**, and for other characters. Celie begins the novel as a passive, quiet young girl, perplexed by her own pregnancy, by her rape at the hands of **Pa**, and her ill-treatment by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Slowly, after meeting **Shug** and seeing her sister run away, Celie develops practical skills: she is a hard worker in the fields, she learns how to manage a house and raise children, and she meets other inspiring women, including Sofia, who has always had to fight the men in her life. Further, she discovers her own sexuality and capacity to love through her developing romance with Shug. Eventually, Celie discovers that her sister Nettie has been writing to her all along, and this, coupled with Shug's support, allows Celie to confront Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, to move to Memphis with Shug, to begin her own pants company, and, eventually, to make enough money to be independent. Celie's luck begins to change: she inherits her biological father's estate, allowing her greater financial freedom, and she manages to repair her relationship with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ (he gives her a **purple** frog as a symbol of his recognition of his earlier bad behavior), and create a kind of family with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, and her own children.

**Nettie's** arc is also one of self-discovery. Nettie received more years of schooling than did Celie, and Nettie has seen the world, working as a missionary in Africa, and eventually marrying a kind and intelligent man. But Nettie also realizes that she can balance her independence, and her desire to work, with a loving married life that also includes two stepchildren—Celie's children, **Olivia** and **Adam**. Indeed, it is the arrival of this extended family on Celie's land at the end of the novel that signals the last stage in both Celie's and Nettie's journey of self-discovery. The sisters have found themselves, and now, as the novel closes, they have found each other.

## Separation and Reunion

The novel begins with Celie's separation from her two children and her sister Nettie. However, the arch of the novel completes with the reunion and reconciliation of the separated family members. The novel ends with all the members joining for family dinner.

## Exercise

1. Compare and contrast Alice Walker's treatment of the gender question with Bengali feminists like Begum Rokeya and Mallika Sengupta.
2. What role does money play in Celie's journey towards independence?
3. What is your assessment of the position of women in Indian society??

## Outcome

The students learnt about-

- Womanism and its distinction from mainstream Western feminism.
- Issues of marginality, patriarchal violence and resistance to it.
- To identify with similar struggles of African American women against patriarchy and analyse the social position of women in our society and how it is portrayed in the writings of Mallika Sengupta, Begum Rokeya and others.

Prepared by M Alam

**Acknowledgement: The LitCharts on *The Color Purple*.**